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**The Spirit of Ecstasy:**

**A 20th century legend; a 21st century icon**

*“It is an interesting story and if it makes you happy, let the myth prevail.” – attributed to Josephine Sykes, daughter of the Spirit of Ecstasy designer Charles Sykes.*

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It’s a tale of mystery, glamour and intrigue. It starts at the dawn of the motoring era, when open roads and the end of the hated Red Flag Act in the UK bring seemingly limitless possibilities for car makers, owners and enthusiasts. It ends in tragedy for more than one of the players, but leaves us with a legend. And a motoring icon that continues to inspire those who make and enjoy Rolls-Royce Motor Cars today.

This is the story of the Spirit of Ecstasy, the flying lady mascot that has gracefully adorned the bonnet of Rolls-Royce models since 6 February 1911.

The tale starts with three very different people; Charles Rolls, Henry Royce and Claude Johnson, the founding fathers of the Rolls-Royce brand.

The Honourable Charles Rolls was an aristocrat, engineer and one of the most experienced drivers of the day. At the turn of the century, he ran a car import business near Earls Court. Dissatisfied with the quality of foreign cars, Rolls sought and found a kindred spirit in Henry Royce, an established electrical engineer with a car manufacturing business in Manchester.

The men were brought together in 1904 by Claude Johnson, who became known as the hyphen in Rolls-Royce. Johnson had been secretary at the Motor Club of Great Britain, latterly the RAC Club, but in 1901 had joined Rolls in business. When C.S. Rolls and Co established exclusive rights to sell Rolls-Royce cars from its dealership in Conduit Street, Mayfair, it was Johnson who helped drive its success.

Johnson was a man with a talent for marketing, with established links to newspaper owners. In an early advertisement for Rolls-Royce he famously coined the line ‘The Best Car in the World’, a phrase repeated by the motoring press of the day, and a moniker that is still applied to Rolls-Royce models today.

John Scott Montagu was a friend of Claude Johnson and Charles Rolls, as well as a fellow motoring pioneer. He founded The Car Illustrated in 1902 and today his son’s estate in Hampshire continues to guard the Spirit of Ecstasy legend.

Montagu appointed a young sculptor and illustrator called Charles Sykes as resident artist for his magazine in 1903. It was Sykes’ beautiful illustrations and bronzes that signposted the way to the creation of the first Spirit of Ecstasy.

The final and most important player in the story is Eleanor Thornton. Eleanor was secretary to Claude Johnson at the Motor Club of Great Britain. She subsequently joined Montagu as his personal assistant - and thereby became a co-worker of Sykes.

It is upon Eleanor’s image that this very British legend takes shape.

The Rolls-Royce board had publicly voiced its displeasure at a growing fashion for gaudy bonnet adornments such as portly policemen that ill-befitted the best cars in the world. And so Johnson turned to Sykes, whose illustrations and sculptures had so impressed him, for a solution.

Thus far the story is fact. But it is to Eleanor Thornton that we turn for the mystery and intrigue. Eleanor was a hard worker, who became known as the ‘brains behind the business’ while working for Montagu. Previously, she had been instrumental in preparing the famous 1,000 mile trial for Johnson during his time at the Motor Club of Great Britain, a competition that did so much to ignite a passion for motoring in its early years.

But Eleanor was much more than just a competent colleague. Beautiful and provocative, she became an inspiration for Sykes artwork. We know for example that she was *Alice in Motorland,* a serialisation that parodied Alice in Wonderland. Eleanor appeared on several front covers, including the 1905 Christmas edition where she took the form of Alice gliding in a winged chariot.

But Eleanor was almost certainly the inspiration for many more of Sykes early sketches, paintings and bronzes. The Whisperer is perhaps the most famous example of a Sykes figurine in bronze, which more than hints at the famous bonnet mascot to come.

Tragically Charles Rolls was never to see a Spirit of Ecstasy fitted to a Rolls-Royce model. A passion for aviation led to tragedy in 1910 at an air display in Bournemouth. It was the UK’s first air fatality.

For Eleanor too, the story ended in an untimely death.

She and Montagu travelled to India in 1915 at the height of the first world war. Eleanor was never to return, the victim of an enemy torpedo attack on their ship, the SS Persia, in the Mediterranean. Montagu survived, returning to read his own obituary in the Times.

So what of the legend? Is the figurine that has adorned Rolls-Royce cars for a century really Eleanor Thornton? Many believe it to be so. But the truth is that no one knows for sure.

Sykes never spoke publicly about Eleanor in the years between 1915 and his death in 1950. He may have confided in his daughter Josephine. But, when asked about Eleanor, her father and the Spirit of Ecstasy, Josephine is reported to have replied:

*“Eleanor was a lovely person. It is an interesting story and if it makes you happy, let the myth prevail.”*

Perhaps the story was stoked by Johnson, a man who recognised the power of PR and the allure of a legend....

What we can say for certain is that the Spirit of Ecstasy is a true icon. Just as each statuette is unique - a consequence of the lost wax technique still used in production - so this symbol of automotive excellence commands unique emotions and meanings for those who admire her.

And whether her image is that of Eleanor Thornton or not, one thing is certain; the Spirit of Ecstasy continues to intrigue, excite and inspire those who work for Rolls-Royce Motor Cars today.